

Euston, we have a problem

Space travel The Association of Autonomous Astronauts wants everyone to go to the moon (trouble is, its global budget is only £157). By Angela Buttolph



Photograph by Justin Leighton

Compared to us, NASA are dinosaurs," says John Eden of the Association of Autonomous Astronauts. "We're sexier in a number of ways." According to the AAA, it can't be much fun being part of a state-controlled space programme – "just dock in and follow orders". So in 1995 a group of 20-somethings with a severe case of wanderlust established the AAA – "the world's first independent and community-based space programme," dedicated to putting the fun back into intergalactic travel. "We're promising sex and parties in space," says John. "That's what people want."

Space is no longer the final frontier, but unless you are a whizz at astrophysics or have £98,000 for a ticket on the first commercial space flights (ETA 2001), you have little hope of getting there. The AAA's Andi Freeman claims it offers the only solution: space travel by the people for the people.

The AAA is more interested in rock 'n' roll than rock samples. Aside from planning lunar-raves, and conducting "research into the sexual possibilities of zero-gravity", much time is spent daydreaming ... or, as the AAA has it, practising "astral projection" (visualising space flights) and "psycho-geographical exercises" (navigating around your earthly neighbourhood using a map of the moon).

Three-sided football matches form a vital part of the AAA's space-training. Playing three

teams (one ball) simultaneously, literally adds a new dimension to the game's more traditional back-and-forth formula; perfect for getting to grips with both the anti-gravity conditions on the moon and the AAA's inherent silliness. To add to the chaos, players swap teams randomly and/or refuse to divulge which team they're playing for. This anarchic pursuit has spawned its motto, "Moving in Several Directions at Once".

The AAA's Five Year Plan to establish "a worldwide network of local, community-based AAA groups dedicated to building their own spaceships", has seen membership, er, rocket. There are currently 30 AAA groups – from Euston to Copenhagen and New Zealand. Surprisingly, there aren't any US-based groups yet. Perhaps they're baffled by the hints of irony (or they're all too busy watching the *X-Files*). The AAA is determined to "leave this society behind", Stuart explains. "We don't want to end up on the moon with branches of McDonald's everywhere."

If 1997's Intergalactic Conference in Vienna is anything to go by, the AAA isn't alone in its beliefs. Hundreds of wannabe-Gagarins, many of them over seven years old, assisted in an ambitious rocket-building programme that AAA members heralded as a triumph, but which one onlooker described as "more *Blue Peter* than Cape Canaveral".

And we're talking space travelling in style.

The AAA advocates the use of fun fur and sequins to decorate both space suits and ships "to counter the masculinist bias of space exploration ... undermining the rocket + phallus fantasy".

"We're serious about the business of going into space," says John, seriously, at an AAA presentation (during The Festival of Underground Literature), which "for technical reasons", had to be held on Earth. Ask the AAA for details of its intergalactic tactics, though, and the answers become a little sketchy ("Euston, we have a problem").

"People do sometimes say, 'Where's your spaceship?' but we're not worried," beams Julie. "There are plenty of DIY rocket enthusiasts out there, and with their technical skills and our imagination we'll go far." This is where NASA has the edge but when it comes to technical know-how, the AAA plays a mean game of three-sided football.

Surprisingly, it is in contact with its rivals – "We hope people in the European Space Agency and NASA will come and work for us instead." No wonder government-controlled space agencies are worried. "Unsurprisingly, the most concerted efforts to undermine the AAA have come from those most threatened – the state space agencies, NASA in particular," tuts Neil. Like, how? "In March NASA announced the discovery of frozen water on the moon ... to show that they alone

have a practical programme for space exploration. NASA are attempting to hijack the dreams and visions of autonomous spaceflight and channel them into support for its own discredited state space programme."

Junior Autonomous Astronauts are exactly the kind of conscientious kids you would want to populate the moon with. Billy, six, is particularly concerned about missing his homework while he's away. He is equally worried that zero-gravity conditions "might make the TV go upside down".

Fiercely anti-capitalist ("No to Blairism and Economic Rationalism! Yes to Weightlessness and Exploration!"), the AAA's collective global funds currently total £157.26. It is relying on appealing for donations from David Bowie (composer of "Space Oddity" and, therefore, doubtless a kindred spirit), sales from T-shirts and the optimistic belief that the price of propulsion-engine technology will drop over time, "like the price of the pocket calculator did".

"No one can now write a history of space travel without mentioning the contributions of the Association of Autonomous Astronauts," says Skeet proudly, disregarding the significance of the world "travel".

"In a sense we're already in outer space," says the AAA's Stuart. "It's very earth-centric to think we're not" ●

AAA, BM Box 3641 London WC1 3XX